



IV. When Songbirds Sing the Blues

Learn about nest parasitism through a puppet play

THE MASTER MOOCHER

A Cowbird Puppet Play

Objectives

Students will:

✎ explain how Brown-headed Cowbirds have become a significant problem for some bird species.

✎ describe how nests of breeding songbirds are parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds.

Subjects

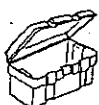
Science, Drama, Language Arts

Suggested time

30 minutes

Materials

In Kit:



- Article - "The Brown-headed Cowbird"
- Script - "The Master Mocher"
- Puppets: Cowbird & Cowbird Egg, Male Yellow-rumped Warbler, Female Yellow-rumped Warbler & Warbler Egg, Nest with chicks

I. The Brown-headed Cowbird

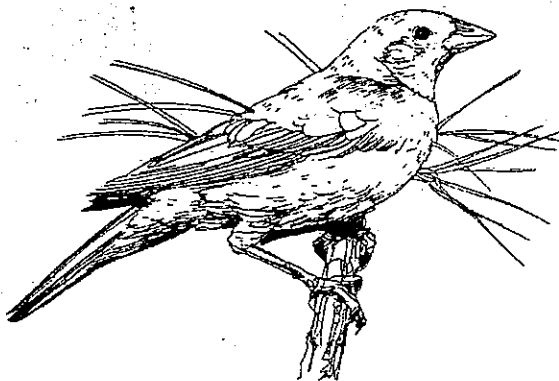
Getting Ready

- ✓ Get ready to read the background article "The Brown-headed Cowbird" or copy and assign to students for independent reading.

Procedure

Explain to students that while some bird populations have gone down, other bird populations have increased. The Brown-headed Cowbird is a bird whose numbers have gone up dramatically over the years. How could this be happening?

Read aloud or have students read independently the background article before viewing the puppet play.



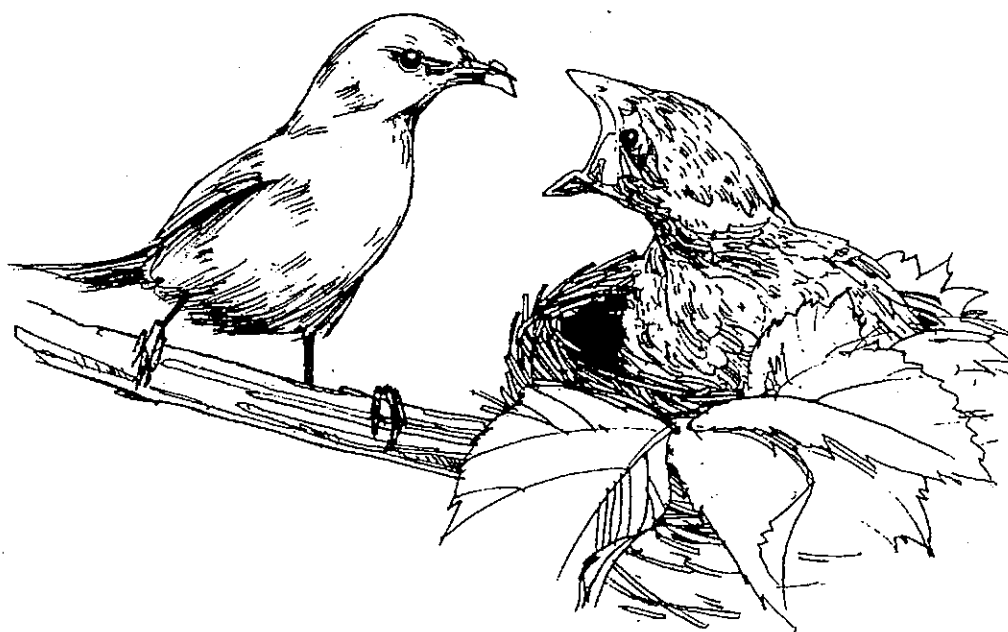
2. The Master Moocher

Getting Ready

- ✓ Depending on which puppets your kit features, choose the appropriate one of the following two scripts--one features yellow-rumped warblers, the other features american redstarts.
- ✓ Have 4 students present the puppet play "The Master Moocher" to the class. Recruit older students to perform the play if you have a class of young students.
- ✓ Copy the script for each person in the play.
- ✓ Have one person manipulate the nest puppet. One hand moves Ace; the other hand moves the warbler chicks. The baby birds should be pushed down so the audience can't see them. They should be ready to pop up at hatching time.
- ✓ Moocher is perched away from the nest with her egg in her pouch.
- ✓ Mrs. Butterbutt has an egg in her pouch ready for laying.

Procedure

Present the puppet play "The Master Moocher" to the class. Involve the students in a discussion about cowbirds following the play.



The Brown-headed Cowbird

The Brown-headed Cowbird might be better named the bison bird. Over 150 years ago, it had never even seen a cow. Instead, this bird lived in the Great Plains of North America where it followed the huge herds of bison as they grazed their way in great sweeping arcs across the vast sea of prairie grasses. The cowbirds went along on these migrations, riding on the great shaggy backs of the bison while picking ticks and mites from their fur. They strutted along beside the great beasts, eating seeds and insects stirred up by their giant hooves.

The cowbirds had a way to follow the bison on their travels and not be left behind to raise their young. They had other birds adopt their eggs and raise their young. Cowbirds probably don't have a clue how to build a nest or feed babies. Instead, they wait for a bird to leave its nest for a moment. In the few minutes that the bird is gone, the cowbird slips in and lays an egg in the nest. Then the cowbird is able to hit the road again leaving the unsuspecting owner of the nest to raise the cowbird chick. When a bird lays its eggs in another bird's nest, it is called *nest parasitism* or *brood parasitism*.

Sometimes the nesting bird recognizes the strange egg and shoves it out of the nest. Or it builds another nest over it. Or it may leave the nest even if it already has its own eggs in it. Many birds, however, don't seem to notice anything unusual about the extra strange egg. They go ahead and raise the cowbird chick along with their own.

Cowbird eggs usually hatch before the bird's own eggs. The cowbird chicks grow faster and beg louder than the other chicks. Because of this, they get more of the food. Many times the only chick to survive in a nest that contains a cowbird chick is the cowbird chick.

Why are they called cowbirds? When Europeans began to move to North America, they began clearing forests and moving in cattle. Cowbirds quickly moved into these new grasslands and began to join this new "bison." They still laid their eggs in other birds' nests. After all, that's what they naturally do. There was no reason to change the way they act just because these "bison" didn't migrate.

Two hundred years ago, the cowbird had 50 host bird species to choose from. But today, as our landscape has changed, the cowbird has moved into the breeding grounds of songbirds that have not developed any natural defense against cowbirds. Now the Brown-headed Cowbird has about 150 new bird hosts. Many of these migrants are in danger because they are not raising their own young.

Meanwhile, there are many more cowbirds now because cowbirds do well in the open, disturbed habitat that comes with cutting down and opening up woodlands. Another reason there are so many cowbirds now is because the average female cowbird can lay up to 40 eggs a year. Most song birds lay three to five eggs a year.

THE MASTER MOOCHER

Written by Pat Tucker

Characters:

Moocher, a Brown-headed Cowbird

Mr. Butterbutt, a male Yellow-rumped Warbler

Mrs. Butterbutt, a female Yellow-rumped Warbler

The Nest, containing:

Ace, a cowbird chick

Feedie, Weedie and Needie, the warbler chicks

THE MASTER MOOCHER

Scene I

(Mr. & Mrs. Butterbutt are flying around building their nest. Then Mrs. Butterbutt lays an egg in the nest. Moocher is watching from a distance. Mrs. Butterbutt sits on the nest for a short time while Mr. Butterbutt flies around catching insects.)

Mrs. Butterbutt: *(Sighs)* It seems like we've been incubating these eggs forever. I hate this part of it. It's soooo boring.

Mr. Butterbutt: I know dear, but really, it's only been 2 days. We've only just begun. I know that egg laying takes a lot out of you. I'll stay here while you go find yourself a nice dinner.

Mrs. Butterbutt: OK. There really isn't much for me to do here anyway.

(She flies off out of sight)

Moocher: Gee, I wish that little warbler would leave. I've got to dump this egg soon. Henry, my mate, left days ago to follow the bison. I've got to follow, too. I certainly can't stick around here and sit on this egg and then raise the little critter, too. The bison would be long gone.

Songbird Blues: When Songbirds Sing the Blues

Mr. Butterbutt: Oh boy, this is boring and I'm really thirsty. I wish I'd gotten a drink before the missus left. It'll probably be hours before she gets back. *(Pause)* You know the creek isn't very far away. These eggs will be all right for a few minutes. *(Flies off out of sight)*

Moocher: Hooray, it's my big chance. *(Flies onto the nest)* I'll just add my egg to theirs. I bet they'll never notice it. Warblers are lousy at math. *(Lays egg)* I better get out of here fast, though. I sure don't want to get caught. Bye, bye, little guy. Good luck! Hatch fast and get the jump on those little warblers. *(Flies off just as Mr. Butterbutt flies back)*

Mr. Butterbutt: There I was just gone a few minutes. *(Settles himself on the nest).* The eggs aren't even chilled. Something feels kind of different, though. *(Stands on the side of the nest and looks at eggs)* No... the eggs are all there. I must be imagining things. *(Settles back on nest)*

Mrs. Butterbutt: *(Flying back to perch)* I'm back, dear. Is everything okay?

Mr. Butterbutt: Just fine, honey. But this is sure tiresome business and I just can't seem to find a way to get comfortable laying on top of these eggs.

Scene II

Two Weeks Later

(Mr. and Mrs. Butterbutt trade places on the nest several times)

Mrs. Butterbutt: *(on nest)* Gee, it's been 12 days. Wait! They're hatching! They're hatching! Oh, I'm so excited I can hardly stand it! This makes it all worth while. *(Stands on edge of nest and looks in)* Yes! One's hatching right now. Look, Mr. Butterbutt! Look, he's already raising his head and asking for food!

(Ace stretches up with open mouth).

Oooooo, isn't he a dear. Quick! Go find him some food!

(Mr. Butterbutt flies off. Mrs. Butterbutt moves to perch)

Mr. Butterbutt: *(Flies to nest and stands on the edge. Ace strains upward and cheeps loudly)* Just hold your horses. Here you go. *(Stuffs food into Ace's mouth)*

Songbird Blues: When Songbirds Sing the Blues

Scene III

Next Day

(Mr. and Mrs. Butterbutt fly back and forth constantly bringing food back to the ever-demanding Ace)

Mr. Butterbutt: *(Standing on edge of nest)* Look the others are hatching. *(Feedie, Weedie and Needie stretch their heads up and cheep)* I don't know how I'm going to feed you all. Your Mom and I can barely keep up with Ace.

Ace: *(Stretching his head above the others in a loud voice)* I'm huuungryyyy!!!!

Mrs. Butterbutt: *(Flying back, stuffs her mouthful of food in Ace's mouth)* There, dear, but the next one is for your brother and sisters.

Scene IV

Six Days Later

(Mr. and Mrs. Butterbutt are frantically gathering food and bringing it to the chicks. All the chicks are yelling for food, but Ace is the loudest and most aggressive about getting it. After some time, the other three should be less loud and less often stretching their heads up)

Mrs. Butterbutt: *(To Mr. Butterbutt, both are on perch)* I don't know how much more I can take. I'm exhausted. But one thing I know.... We're raising the Arnold Swartzenegger of warblers with that Ace. He's going to grow up to be quite a bird. Just look at how big he is.

Mr. Butterbutt: Yes, I sure am proud of him. I do worry about Feedie, Needie and Weedie, though. Do you think they're getting enough to eat? Seems like I'm always feeding Ace.

Mrs. Butterbutt: Don't worry about it. It's more important that we raise one really healthy bird than a bunch of weaklings.

Mr. Butterbutt: Yes, you're right about that. Oh, oh. He's waking up.

Ace: *(Stretches up, mouth open)* Mom! Dad! I'm huuuungryyyyy! *(Mr. and Mrs. Butterbutt fly off for more food)*

The End

THE MASTER MOOCHER

A Parasitism Puppet Play

Characters

Rudí: Mr. Redstart

Rosa: Mrs. Redstart

Moocher: The Cowbird

Chippy, Pippy & Bob: The Redstart Chicks

Angus: The Cowbird Chick

Scene I

(It is springtime in the woods which is surrounded by cow pastures. The scene opens with Rudí doing a courtship flight in his territory in order to attract Rosa. He flies in short, semicircular, horizontal flights with his wings held stiff.)

Rudí: Hey Rosa, look at me! Check out this nesting place. I picked it out special, just for you. What do you think?

Rosa: Oh, I like it! This looks like the place we nested last year! There are nice trees for nesting. We've got water close by in the creek, and WOW, what a great view!

Rudí: Hey, that's what is different. Now I remember. This is the same place but that view wasn't here. That field used to be a forest and now it is a cow pasture. It sure opens things up.

Rosa: Well, let's get started. We've got a lot of work ahead of us—building a nest and raising our chicks.

Rudí: I'll tell you what. Let's divide up this work. Why don't you gather the nest material, you build the nest, you lay the eggs, you sit on the eggs, and I'll hang out here and flash my orange tail, act important and defend our territory.

Rosa: Uh, sure. Why not. That sounds fair sort of.



Scene 11

(Four days later. Rosa has finished building the nest. Rosa lays her eggs.)

Rudí: *(impressed)* Nice work on the nest there, Rosa! I particularly like the lichen decorations around the edges. And, hey, look there, you've already laid four eggs. Honey, we're going to be parents!

Rosa: *(A bit depressed)* Now comes the boring part. I've got to sit here for almost two weeks keeping these eggs warm so they will hatch.

Rudí: Don't you worry. I'll be around to keep you company. And if you want to get out and stretch your wings, I'll keep an eye on the little eggs for you.

(Meanwhile, at the edge of the pasture, Moocher sits watching the Redstarts)

Moocher: *(Impatiently)* When are they going to leave that nest? I've got eggs to lay . . . things to do . . . cows to hang out with. I can't sit around here for ever! My great-great-great-great grand parents couldn't waste time building a nest when they had to follow the wandering bison herds. And even though these cows don't leave this pasture, it's just not in my nature to raise my own young. I'll let those little up-starts, er, I mean Redstarts do it for me.

Rosa: *(Sighs)* Rudí honey, I've just got to stretch my wings. And I'm real thirsty. Would you watch things while I'm gone?

Rudí: Sure thing babe, don't you worry. I've got things totally under control here. You just take your time.

(Rosa flies off)

Rudí: *(A bit restless)* Hmmmmmm. Rosa has been gone for nearly three minutes already and I'm kind of hungry. These eggs aren't going anywhere. I think I'll just slip away and find a nice big juicy caterpillar to eat. *(Rudí turns to the eggs)* You little fellas stick tight, now. I won't be gone long.



(Rudí flies off while Moocher sees the opportunity)

Moocher: Now's my big chance. I'll just slip in there, lay my egg and be gone.

(Moocher flies to the nest and lays her own egg)

Moocher: *(To her egg)* You take good care, big fella. Grow up to be big and strong. And don't let those little warbler chicks push you around. When you're old enough, you can join the cowbird flocks over there by the cows.

Scene III

(The Redstarts return)

Rudí: There, I was only gone a few minutes. *(Looking into the nest)* Let's see, one, two, three, four. . . . yep, they are all there. And it was certainly worth the risk. That big old caterpillar I found tasted so good.

Rosa: *(Flies back to the nest)* Boy, I needed that break. *(Settles back on the nest)* Hmmmmmm. Something feels funny. *(Gets up to look at the eggs)* All the eggs are there. That one seems awfully big though. *(Settles again on the nest)* Oh well, I must be imagining things.

Scene IV

(One week later)

Rosa: *(Sounding extremely bored)* Whew! This is getting really old. I've been sitting on this nest for 12 long days and nights. *(Suddenly looking startled)* Honey, hurry, I think they are hatching. One of the eggs moved.

Rudí: *(Flies quickly back to the nest)* That big one is hatching. This is so exciting.

Angus: *(Stretches his neck up and in a deep loud voice says:)* Feeeeeeeeeeeeed meeeeeee! I'm HUNGRY! I want some insects. Give me a caterpillar. Give me a beetle. Give me a fly. Heck, I'll even eat a wasp. Just feed me!



Warbler chicks: *(The small warbler chicks hatch and stretch their necks too and in little voices say:)* Feed us. Feed us. We are hungry too!

(Rudí and Rosa frantically fly back and forth to the nest bringing all kinds of insects to feed the chicks.)

Rudí: Goodness gracious, look at those mouths to feed. This is a lot of work.

Rosa: Yes, I'll say. That big fella eats like a cow. We should name him Angus. I'm so proud of him. He's going to grow up to be the biggest, strongest warbler of all.

Rudí: You know dear, Chippy, Pippy and Bob don't seem to be doing well at all. That Angus has quite an appetite. He's eaten every insect and spider I can find and he's still hungry!

Angus: Fooooooooood! I want more fooooooooood!

Warbler chicks: *(In faint little voices)* Food. How's about a little worm. We'll even share a mosquito. Anything. Just give us something to eat.

Rosa: You're right Rudí. They are looking kind of weak and sickly. But you know. That Angus . . . he's something to be proud of. If the little guys don't make it, at least we've got Angus.

Rudí: Absolutely, Rosa, my dear. We are raising a whale of a warbler. Is he special, or what?

Angus: *(In a loud, deep, mooing-like sound)* Fooooooooooooooooooooooooooooood!

The End



Discussion

After the puppet play, involve students in a discussion to stimulate comprehension and conversation.

- **How do you think this story will end?**
- **Which of the birds did you like best? Why?**
- **Why did the cowbird lay her egg in the warbler's nest?**
- **Was Moocher bad because she laid her egg in the warbler's nest?**
- **Why do you think the warblers didn't notice the different egg?**
- **What was realistic about this play and what was not?**
- **Does it make sense that the warblers would feed the loudest, biggest chick and not the others?**
- **Why do you think birds pay more attention to their noisiest and biggest chicks?**
- **Is the cowbird the problem? Or is it the changes that humans have made in the habitat that makes opportunities for cowbirds?**
- **Is it okay to kill cowbirds to protect birds that are suffering from nest parasitism?** Explain to students that cowbirds are protected by law just as the birds they parasitize.

Add any new information to the "Problems for Songbirds Chart."



Assessment

Performance Assessment



Make a Fact Web

Have students create a concept map with information about the Brown-headed Cowbird. Draw a picture of the cowbird in the center of the web and then add around it all the information they can remember about the natural history of the bird.

Alternately, students could create a fact mobile. Hang information in writing or in pictures from a big picture of a Brown-headed Cowbird.

Student Reflections

Have students record their thoughts about the story in their journals. Suggested writing prompts include:



I learned...

I was surprised...

I think that cowbirds...

Teacher Reflections

- ☐ Were students able to summarize main ideas and factual information about the cowbird?
- ☐ Are students making value judgments about cowbirds?
- ☐ Do students understand that problems associated with cowbird parasitism are a result of habitat changes created by human presence?

Branching Out

Create Your Own Plays

Have students make up their own puppet plays using the puppets. Invent a scenario in which the warblers recognize the cowbird egg. Make up a creative play in which the cowbird is invited to the warblers' tree as a dinner guest.

Mamas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowbirds

Have students create new lyrics for this song by Willie Nelson.

Kirtland's Warbler

Find out about the Kirtland's Warbler, one of the rarest of the migratory songbirds. This endangered species has very restricted habitat requirements and is found only in the young jack pine stands in northern lower Michigan. Continued cowbird parasitism of the Kirtland's Warbler could lead to its extinction. For information write to Michigan DNR, Natural Heritage Program, Box 30028, Lansing, MI 48909. Phone: (517) 373-1263.





IV. When Songbirds Sing the Blues

*Read a biased article
about cowbirds.*

WHAT ABOUT THOSE COWBIRDS?

Objectives

Students will:

describe how animals are labeled as good or bad based on behaviors that we like or dislike.

discriminate between fact and opinion.

analyze errors in thinking.

determine an author's purpose.

Subjects

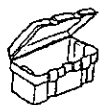
Science, Language Arts

Suggested time

45 minutes

Materials

In Kit:



- "Cowbird", an article by Julius King

Procedure

Read aloud or have students read the article "Cowbird." This article was published in 1934 from an old children's book about birds. Tell students that the article was written to teach children some facts about birds. As they hear or read the article, ask them to think about what might be facts or opinions in the writing.

After reading, tell students that in general facts can be verified, or checked out with proof, whereas opinions cannot be verified.

Lead students in a discussion with the following questions:

- From the article can you tell if the author has an opinion about cowbirds?
- How does he express his opinions in his writing? Find the words he uses that show that he is stating an opinion.
- From what they can tell about the author, what would he consider a "good bird?"
- How is he deciding what is good and bad about animals?
- Is this an example of a good science book for children? Why or why not?
- If the cowbird were rare, would people like it better?
- If the cowbird were prettier, would people like it better?
- What animals do you like and dislike? Are there things in common about the animals on each list?



Assessment



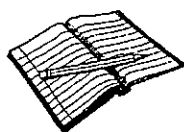
Performance Assessment

Have students determine which of the following are facts and which are opinions:

- Cowbirds lay their eggs in other birds' nests.
- Cowbirds are bad parents.
- Cowbirds have caused some bird species to decline.
- Cowbirds are lazy because they make other birds raise their young.
- Birds that don't recognize their own young and raise cowbirds are stupid.

Ask student to write two more facts about cowbirds and two opinions about cowbirds.

Student Reflections



My opinion of cowbirds is...

I have changed how I think about cowbirds in this way...

Teacher Reflections

- ☐ Can students discriminate between fact and opinion?
- ☐ Were students able to analyze errors in the author's thinking?
- ☐ Could students determine the author's purpose?

Branching out

The Cowbird Trial

Stage a trial in which the cowbird is accused of chick neglect.

